

Ethel L. Payne

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Known as the “First Lady of the Black Press,” Ethel L. Payne was a pioneer for African Americans and for women as the first female journalist for *The Chicago Defender*. Payne expressed her views and fought with fervor for civil rights in her articles for 27 years. A civil rights campaign was at the top of her list, and nothing was going to stand in her way. She traveled to the corners of the world to spread the word about what was going on in the world concerning civil rights. Who would have thought this Chicago native would grow up to be a fiery freedom fighter?

In Chicago, Illinois, August 14, 1911, Ethyl Payne was born. She had a passion for justice from her birth. Payne originally wanted to be a lawyer, but later changed her mind after discovering a hidden talent for writing while attending Lindblom High School. She later attended Crane Jr. College and the Medill School of Journalism. The story of how her career began is quite interesting. While working as a hostess in an Army Special Services Club in Japan, she allowed a visiting reporter from *The Defender* to read her work. The reporter liked what he saw and took the work back with him to Chicago and began using her journal entries as topics for cover stories.

Payne went to work full time with *The Defender* starting in 1951, writing with a passion for desegregation and toleration for African Americans. After working in Chicago for two years, she then took over the Washington D.C. department of *The Defender*. Payne’s brag sheet would include interviewing leaders of the Civil Rights movement, as well as covering numerous Civil Rights marches, the Montgomery Bus

Boycott of 1956, desegregation attempts in 1957 at Little Rock High School, and the March on Washington in 1967. Payne even accompanied Vice-President Nixon to independence ceremonies in Ghana. Payne seemed to also have achieved a high status among politicians and prominent figures in that she also covered seven United States presidents as a correspondent reporting from Vietnam and Africa. President Lyndon B. Johnson invited her to witness the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Act of 1965. In 1972, she became the first black female to be broadcast on the radio and television as a commentator for CBS. She retired in 1982. Even after getting along in years, Ethel Payne kept on fighting.

Ethel L. Payne died on May 28, 1991, of a heart attack. She was 79 years old. She was a bold woman who had a talent with words. She became a prominent figure amid the black culture and in the world of journalism as well. She traveled far and wide and rubbed elbows with the high and mighty to make sure she was heard. Payne once said, “I fought all my life to bring about change, to correct injustices and the inequalities in the system,” and fight she did. [From Ebony Society of Philatelic Events and Reflections, “Ethel L. Payne,” <<http://www.esperstamps.org>> (Jan. 18, 2005); National Association of Black Journalists, “Black Journalist Ethel Payne to be Commemorated on U.S. Postage Stamp,” <<http://www.members.nabj.org>> ; Washington Press Club Foundation, “Ethel Payne Introduction,” <www.npc.press.org> (Jan.18, 2005); Women in Journalism, “Ethel L. Payne-First Lady of Black Press,” <<http://mutirace.org>> (Jan.18, 2005).]